

Each evening was the same ritualistic encounter while Shaan Syed was growing up: a prayer and absolute silence throughout the house. His father wanted his only son to have something of the Islamic culture by making him perform just one of the five daily prayers. “Maghrib” performed after sunset when the sky is its hottest pink self, means “in the West” to indicate the direction of where the sun finally falls each evening as you face Mecca. That burning orange of the sky is found throughout this new series of paintings that Syed started during a three-month residency at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts in Omaha, Nebraska in 2018. The colour is actually pink with slow, careful additions of red – leading the eye to perceive it as potentially a type of intense orange. The colours enact an instability and bounce back at our eyes as we try to make out details within the painting. There are scratches and scrawls, moments where lines become language and could be Arabic (as Syed has painted his name in earlier works), or when the under layer of colour escapes through and we can see “orange” come through white or the ochre pigment embedded with sand. The complexity of the push-pull – in relation to Hans Hofmann's technique – wondering if the white areas were carved out against the orangey-pink or vice versa, is further experienced by the reveal of the brushstrokes which carry fast movements and a sense of physicality. Syed's critical inquiry of abstraction through the tradition of oil painting considers the practice of painting as a paradox of addition and subtraction: a process of applying and adding material to the surface in order for it to metaphorically reveal something about itself.

In three paintings titled *Qibla* – the direction one faces when praying – the horizon line is multiplied and created by sewing canvas together, turning the underside of the stitch towards us. The exposed seams disrupt the surface, play with the continuity of shape and function to divide the canvas in parts. The key motif of the minaret furthers that division or binary between two sides or halves that come together and start to appear as the in-between space of two structures, or a structure split in half. Syed cannot remember which came first – the step motif or the realization that these are the steps of a minaret – particularly the spiral minaret of the Great Mosque of Samarra in Iraq which is circular and yet appears flat from a distance. During his evening prayer, there was no radio or television permitted in the house –and yet the architecture of a minaret holds an inherent relationship to sound in that it is built purposely for the call to prayer (*Adhan*) by the muezzin – the beautiful sound that reverberates five times a day.

The step motif of the minaret functions as a symbol of Islam as both a religion and a culture, which Syed approaches from a secular perspective. Structurally, the motif forms an anchor within the image, but is also an abstraction now free from the linear, Western trajectory of abstraction by being rooted in a visual language of a culture that has employed the non-iconic through signs, language and geometry for centuries. The graphic quality of Syed's paintings recalls the work of Moroccan

artist Mohamed Melehi (b. 1936), but simultaneously resonate with the concerns of German artist Blinky Palermo (1943-1977) and his fabric paintings that engaged form and colour. This push-pull between references can perhaps be read into Syed's paintings that play with the binary and a push-pull between cultures – a literal representation of his Muslim Pakistani father and Protestant English mother. And yet, while the childhood self resists all rigour and discipline, the daily evening prayer – *Maghrib* – has informed a way of thinking and perspective for this new body of paintings: from the East, one looks West.

by Swapnaa Tamhane

Shaan Syed was born in Toronto (1975), he lives and works in London, UK. Syed holds a diploma in Fine Arts from OCAD in Toronto and a Masters degree in Fine Arts from Goldsmiths College in London. Syed has presented several solo exhibitions including *I & I* at Kunsthalle Winterthur, Switzerland; *Licking Forward Tangerine* at noshowspace, London; and *CAPITAL!* at the Michael Janssen Gallery, Berlin. He has participated in numerous group exhibitions including *The Other Side* at Power Plant, Toronto; *Here* at the Aga Khan Museum, Toronto; *Sam Windett and Shaan Syed* at Patrick De Brock, Knokke; *Manuel Graf and Shaan Syed* at Herrmann Germann Contemporary, Zurich; *John Moores Painting Prize 2016*, Liverpool; and *The Violet Crab* at the David Roberts Art Foundation (DRAF), London. Syed was a finalist in the RBC Canadian Painting Competition in 2001, 2003 and 2004 and was nominated for the 2004 Sobey Prize for the Arts. He has received awards and scholarships from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, the Elephant Trust UK, Arts Council England, the Canada Council for the Arts, and Jerwood Contemporary Painters UK. In 2018/19, Syed founded and ran *Aqbar*, a temporary gallery space in East London where he invited his London peers to show one painting per exhibition.

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